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From Norms to Normative Configurations: A pragmatist and relational approach to theorising normativity in IR

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Abstract:

Normativity matters in international politics, but IR scholars will benefit from dereifying 'norms' as units into a relational, configurational alternative. The alternative I propose here is the 'normative conflation': an arrangement of ongoing, interacting practices establishing action-specific regulation, value-orientation, and avenues of contestation. This responds to recent constructivist scholarship, particularly from relational sociology and practice theory, that implies the need for ontological and analytical alternatives to 'norms' as central concepts responsible for establishing rules, institutions, and values in social life. I offer a way of conceptualising and analysing normativity consistent with these alternative approaches. Namely, I have brought together a pragmatist theory of action with the social theories of a number of key relational social theorists and philosophers, oriented around a reading of what norms talk actually does for social enquiry. This yields a concept I call the 'normative configuration'. I then outline a three-stage process—dereification, attributing agency, and tracing transactions—that allows scholars to study transformations in normative configurations. Finally, I discuss what this contributes to the recent turns towards practices and relations, as the latest direction in constructivist scholarship within the discipline

Much mainstream constructivist research in IR frames explanations in terms of *norms* (McCourt 2016; Hoffmann 2010), approached as widely held rules about right action, to account for puzzling phenomena in world politics. However, what scholars call 'norms' are rarely consistent, singular social things, instead comprising entangled, often internally inconsistent arrays of practices and standards, undergoing ongoing revision and contestation by the people enacting them. To talk of norms may thus be problematic, or at least analytically unhelpful, when those arrays of practices and principles are unsettled, in unusual internal tension, or undergoing rapid evolution as a result of internal or external pressures. Put differently, if rules, values, and institutions are changing fast, and it is not clear why, an explanation may

come only by focusing on a heterogenous array of social processes rather than some agglomeration of the same into ‘norms’, old and new.

As contemporary ethno-nationalist movements seek to reframe politics across the global north, by challenging and recalibrating their normative orientations, these effects are especially important. These challenges, and challengers, span different contexts and have different agendas, but collectively they may trigger the evolution—or erosion—of a host of long-standing arrangements in hugely consequential ways. In these situations, observers may see rapid transformations in the status and content of what is right, proper, desirable, and authoritative, and yet be unable to easily identify whether this the change of a norm, the replacement of one norm with another, or the simple erosion of a norm.

Consider three examples of recent United States security policies. The use of ‘enhanced interrogation’ methods appears to many observers to be a case of torture,¹ and thus a violation of the prohibition thereon (McKeown 2011; Panke and Petersohn 2011)—in other words, ‘norm violation’ and perhaps even ‘norm death’. Yet proponents of those methods did not, and to this day do not, claim that the prohibition on torture is illegitimate, or that it was in their case acceptable to engage in torture. Rather, they claim that their methods were not transgressive—that what they did was not torture at all (John Rizzo, interview with author). To refer to this as a case of norm violation or erosion thus means passing judgement on the validity of this claim, substituting methodological fiat for an anthropologically sensitive investigation into what involved actors actually were contesting or seeking to transform. A similar dynamic may be seen in the multinational rise of private military and security contractors in warzones: while some scholars claim this is a violation of a norm prohibiting mercenarism (Petersohn 2014), practitioners themselves are adamant that these contractors are not mercenaries (Christopher Mayer, interview with author), and that mercenaries continue to be rightfully excluded from conflict zones (Avant 2016). Again, the same dynamic appears in considering whether the use of drones to engage in targeted killing, now a staple of US security policy, constitutes a violation of a prohibition on assassination. Those

¹ Including, when ‘off the clock’, this author.

behind the development of the targeted killing programme argue that it does not, not because no such prohibition against assassination should exist but rather that assassination is just not the same thing (Pratt 2018). To claim that these are cases of norm change or violation requires scholars to take an *a priori* position on the very issue of political controversy they are researching—for to argue that a prohibition is being overturned is not an evaluatively neutral stance. Moreover, these cases feature the gradual improvisation and institutionalisation of new technical and professional skills and standards, in ways not just captured by the idea of contestation over what a rule or principle implies. Clearly something is *normatively* different, but the features of the cases make it hard to express this difference in norms-talk.

If a scholar cannot easily distinguish between these possibilities, and is instead confronted with a fluctuating tapestry of practices and principles, it becomes unhelpful to analyse changes through the language of norm emergence, cascades, and other such norms-talk common in the field—all of which, explicitly or tacitly, treats norms as *units* and thus requires discrete norms be denoted, often in advance of analysis. Attempting to do so risks dividing institutions and actions up in ways that are not reflected or respected in practice, obscuring how putatively similar norms can mean different things depending on time and place. Moreover, an increasing body of scholarship in the field oriented around practices and relationality is inconsistent with the ontological treatment of norms as distinct social objects, and in many cases has avoided discussion of norms altogether (Jackson and Nexon 1999; Adler and Pouliot 2011; see also McCourt 2016). This yields accounts of thoroughly normative things—values, conventions, customs, and cultures (and transformations thereof)—detached from those constructivist conversations focused on how norms drive outcomes in IR.

To address these problems, this article draws on pragmatist and relational social theory to provide a new ontology of normativity, as a package of *causes and effects* in international politics, meaning forces that both shape outcomes and are themselves outcomes, undergoing maintenance and transformation alike. I offer an alternative concept in place of the norm: the *normative configuration*, defined as an arrangement of ongoing, interacting practices establishing action-specific regulation,

value-orientation, and avenues of contestation. All ‘norms’ are normative configurations, and while analytical benefits can and have accrued from their ‘arrestation’ (Jackson and Nexon 1999) into the concept of norm, these benefits are contingent upon historically particular case features. Scholars should also be able to break norms down into their constituent, moving relations—de-reified—and explore their normativity itself as the outcome of particular kinds of practices and processes that may be rearranged in a wide range of ways.

I begin by examining how scholars have approached norms and normativity, tracing the analytical strengths and limits of their concepts. I argue that IR norms scholarship has mainly studied how norms emerge and change. However, by treating norms as discrete objects, it has approached them epidemiologically: as traveling and evolving packages of moral information. This reifies important dimensions of social action and interaction responsible for establishing normative force; that is, it takes multiple processes of action and interpretation and gathers them into fixed units. On examination, these processual factors are central to implementing and embedding normative valuation or force in particular practices and institutional arrangements. While missing from most theoretical formulations, I find this relational and processual account already tacitly at work in recent constructivist research. Indeed, it has been a fertile basis for establishing a robust research programme—one virtually definitive of the positive constructivist project in the field. Nevertheless, I argue that there is good reason to develop an alternative concept, provide that alternative can fulfil certain conditions.

The second part of the paper details the alternative. Drawing on pragmatist and relational social theory, I develop ‘normative configurations’ as a concept for understanding how normativity operates and changes. I proceed by examining what social theories of norms exist to do, analytically or ontologically, and what an alternative to them should therefore also do. On the basis of this synthetic reading of social theory, I base normative configurations on four ‘wagers’: that normativity is embedded in action (rather than being distinct from it); that normativity provides both ends *and* means for action (rather than providing only ends); that normativity links ends and means *recursively* (rather than ends influencing means but not vice versa); and that normativity crystallises into institutional arrangements through the

stabilisation of practices (rather than through practice-independent discursive or formal constitutive processes). Together these wagers can orient investigations of normative influences and changes without referencing the movements or life cycles of norms.

Third, I outline a three-stage methodological procedure for examining changes in normative configurations over time: dereification, attributing agency, and tracing transactions. This approach lets one break an apparent rule, principle, or value down into its component relations and processes, determine where contestation or weak institutionalisation generates locations of instability, and track unfolding mechanisms of transformation. I situate this procedure within existing IR projects to develop practice-centric methods of analysis.

In a final section, I discuss how my proposed approach fits with the sympathetic projects of existing relational and practice-focused IR scholars. In particular, I argue that the approach to normativity and action developed here is consistent with the practice and relational ‘turns’, while contributing to them a potent vocabulary for studying normative transformation. Perhaps most notably, it offers the prospect of greater synthesis of mainstream (that is, norms-focused) and critical constructivism. It makes the theoretical goods and themes of the norms research programme ontologically tractable to those working from relational and practice-theoretic approaches, while also introducing the critiques offered by those approaches to the broader community of norms scholars.

IR and the Norms Research Programme

Normativity interests scholars across the social sciences and humanities. The concept of ‘norm’, in various forms, enjoys widespread currency not just in sociology and political science, but in philosophy, psychology, economics, and anthropology, carrying a range of overlapping meanings, both within and across these fields.² Broadly, ‘norms’ may refer to values, mores, conventions, identities,

² In psychology, ‘norms’ refer both to conventions of ethical conduct that shape individual behaviour (Dubois 2003) and to cognitive categories into which information may be sorted (Kahneman and Miller 1986). In moral philosophy, a ‘norm’ is usually a rule of conduct carrying moral force, and there is a robust debate over the epistemic and ontological status of norms as such (Von Wright 1963; Searle 1995). Economists and rational choice theorists treat ‘norms’ as

classificatory schema, shared expectations of behaviour, and associated practices (Moore 1956; Cancian 1975; Bicchieri 2005; Elster 2009), shaping actors' moral opinions and featuring in processes of socialisation and social regulation.

The study of norms has also been a central preoccupation of constructivist IR scholars. Scholars sought answers to the question 'what do values, principles, and rules *do* in international politics?' The history and direction of this research programme can be understood in terms of waves. The first wave, mainly spanning the 1990s and early 2000s, brought the concept of norms, as a way to account for normativity, to a discipline otherwise consumed by rationalist debates over the comparable merits of neo-realism and neo-liberalism (Hoffmann 2010). The earliest of this literature (see, among others, Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, Kratochwil 1989; Nadelmann 1990; Finnemore 1996a; 1996b; Barkin and Cronin 1994; Katzenstein 1996) sought mainly to establish the salience of a normative dimension to the conduct of international politics. At the forefront of the first wave of this research programme were major studies into the emergence and spread of prohibitions, such as on nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 1999), chemical weapons (Price 1995), and slavery (Keck and Sikkink 1998). By the end of the 1990s, scholars had developed complex models of norm 'life-cycles' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and of the reasons why some norms endure while others disappear or fail to become prominent in the first place (see, among others, Klotz 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Bernstein 2000; 2001).

The second wave, beginning in the early 2000s, partially de-reified norms, and attended to their dynamic nature more fully than the scholarship of the first wave. Actors themselves played a more prominent causal role, contesting and interpreting norms rather than passively internalising them through processes of socialisation (Acharya 2004; Cortell and Davis 2005; Sandholtz 2008; Wiener 2004; 2008; Krook and True 2012; Wiener 2004; 2008; 2009; Hofferberth and Weber 2015). Scholars of this wave studied norm change at a finer resolution, temporal or institutional, of analysis, whereby a single norm may be interpreted or manifested

determinants of interests and thus of preferences (Axelrod 1986; Fearon and Wendt 2002), or in functionalist terms, as means of coordinating social action, either intentional or as the unintended and emergent result of collective social interactions over time (Opp 2001; Elster 1989).

differently across social time and space. In this literature, norm change arises out of a temporary settling of ongoing contestation and interpretation, which, this work argues, can arise out of anything from a significant shift in institutional culture to executive imposition. Wiener (2009) offers the most articulate direct theorisation of norms here, advising scholars to focus on ‘meaning-in-use’, contingency, and to focus on the ‘micro-level...settings of interaction’ (178). Hofferberth and Weber (2015) propose something similar, arguing that norms be approached through an ‘interpretive’ methodology (75) whereby they serve as sense-making and linguistic devices. However, contextualising norms in this way still retains problems of reification. When norms are entirely products of interpretation, they become the epiphenomena of ‘cultural practices’ (Wiener 2009, 181) or are otherwise simply focal-points of discourse, and when they are treated as causes or as features of social structures with their own qualities, they do not differ from the ‘norms-as-units’ ontology underlying first wave norms scholarship. In other words, the turn towards contestation and interpretation may dereify norms, but only by relinquishing the robust causal role normativity can play outside of discourse.

The recent work of Wiener, Hofferberth and Weber, and others studying norms in a similar way reflects increasing, though still limited engagement or convergence with critical constructivist research. Critical constructivists, taking after Kratochwil (1989) and Onuf (1989) rather than ‘soft constructivism’ (Wendt 1999), have long examined discursive processes of normative interpretation (Epstein 2008; Towns 2012), but their work has largely remained on the margins of more conventional norms research—in a sense, as part of ‘the constructivism that wasn’t’ (Jackson 2012). They have studied the ways interpretation and practice establish the ends and ethics of the conduct of world politics, but not how one norm may come to replace another, spread throughout the international system, and influence state conduct—the processes of greatest interest to the first wave.

The most recent scholarship on norms still struggles to make room for agency, usually understood as some personal capacity for moral judgement and autonomy of action, without reducing its object to processes of interpretation alone (Bucher 2014). Perhaps the most sociologically sophisticated of this work is that of Schmidt’s (2014) pragmatist theory of norm change. He aligns with the relationalism

proposed by Hofferberth and Weber (2015) but assigns norms a role in practice that goes beyond cognition and discourse. By identifying a norm with a practice, then providing a theory of how practices transform that defines the normative implications thereof, he concretises norm change in a way that considers contestation and interpretation (for all practices undergo these things) but also agency (as the capacity of people for flexibility in action and judgement), and opens a theoretical door for a range of sociological perspectives on practice to contribute in new ways to the IR literature on norms. Pragmatist philosophy and social theory provide the conceptual basis for this identification, but Schmidt does not explore them to their full potential. First, he retains a more or less one-to-one relationship between a norm and its referent practice, which makes it harder to grasp shifting and often inconsistent arrangements of practices and principles, in ways that may not admit of neat reduction or translation. Second, the ‘mechanism’ of norm change Schmidt proposes does not explain why any one particular norm has changed, because it is a general theory of action—it is meta-theory, describing how any practices changes, regardless of case. What it instead does is direct attention towards the dynamics of creativity, relationality, and evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) revision of what is normative.

The different strands of norms scholarship thus embrace a sort of ontological duality. Early work, employing a definition still in use in plenty of empirical work today, approaches norms as reified social objects: ‘standard[s] of appropriate behavior for actors’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 891), possessing both a subjective and inter-subjective dimension (Hoffmann 2010), respectively shaping actors’ moral opinions and featuring in processes of socialisation and social regulation. Norms are features of the social world that guide people in how to live and make up the context for much of their life in the first place, and thus are discrete, causally efficacious ‘things’ (Krook and True 2012) that can feature in claims of cause and effect. To be sure, scholars have recognised that norms do not float freely, but are enmeshed in a given context. Finnemore, for example, avers ‘the importance of viewing norms not as individual ‘things’ floating atomistically in some international social space but rather as part of a highly structured social context...a fabric of interlocking and interwoven norms rather than individual norms of this or

that' (1996a, 161). Nevertheless, by orienting analysis around specific norms, both in theory and in practice, the ultimate result is atomistic. Norms still end up existing as traveling units of moral information, embodied in social and psychological form, influencing the course of things.

Conversely, critical constructivists and some second-wave norms scholars approach norms as points of discursive contestation or orientation, which avoids reifying them but also significantly constrains their potential role in explanations of change—here 'norms' change, but there are no consequences to this because they are the outcomes of underlying processes of interpretation. Rather, a change in a norm indicates that something else has changed, discursively or hermeneutically. In other words, the choice is between reification, to atomistic units, and reduction to other social-theoretic categories.

To be sure, many cases of institutional transformation involve breaks from the past, or revolve around distinct rules, principles, or values so pronounced and obvious in substance that they can be (and have been) productively explained through norms-talk. However, some cases of transformation, because they are uneven or internally inconsistent, span a heterogeneous set of practices, or are the outcome of a range of agendas and instruments, do not admit of neat division into old norms, new norms, norm entrepreneurs, and discourses of contestation revolving around the interpretation of a discrete standard or value.

Yet these kinds of cases are of great interest to relational and practice-theoretic IR scholars, whose focus on institutionally situated processes of evolution or transformation proceed from a more micro- and meso-level sensitivity to agency (see McCourt 2016; see also Adler and Pouliot 2011; Jackson and Nexon 1999). Moreover, when relational IR does take a macro-sociological perspective, it does so often with attention to the dispersed and plastic nature of values and conventions (see, for example, Linklater 2011; Nexon 2009), further limiting the usefulness of a 'norms-as-things' ontology, compared to one in which norms are de-reified into configurations of processes and relations of interaction. Indeed, relational and practice-theoretic IR research has thus largely left behind norms research for this reason (McCourt 2016), for lack of an ontologically commensurate, analytically

more helpful approach to norms and normativity. In the next section, I address this by proposing one such approach.

From Norms to Normativity Configurations

I propose a concept better suited to tracing complex processes or practices establishing normativity and generating transformations: the ‘normative configuration’. It escapes the predominant deontic or ‘logic of appropriateness’ view (March and Olsen 1998), whereby ‘norms’ serve as the cognitive underpinnings of rule-following or morally-driven action, provide ends or direction based on values (Hofferberth and Weber 2015; see also Parsons 1937). Nor does it treat norms as emergent patterns or instrumentally established coordination principles, as rationalists do, in ways that offer no traction, by definition, on the obvious ethical character of many empirical cases.³ These views are caught between the ‘upward conflation’ of voluntarism and a ‘downward conflation’ of over-emphasising the determining properties of structure (Archer 1995; see also Loyal 2003), and obscure a heterogeneous array of social processes in which agency is distributed and change is inconsistent yet common. Drawing from pragmatist and relational social theory, I suggest an alternative that better captures the pathways of social regulation, how normativity is involved in the constitution of social arrangements and orders, and the reciprocal interplay of morality and instrumentality in action. It reveals the constellations that make it possible for normativity to fluctuate without constituting an episodic or self-evident change in institutionalised conventions.

The alternative I suggest builds on a small but potent set of existing criticisms of the norms research programme. By placing situated creativity and a processual view of social relationships at the centre of this approach, I join with Hofferberth and Weber (2015) and with Wiener (2008; 2014) in tracing the multi-dimensionality and interactivity of normative dynamics. Indeed, Hofferberth and Weber (2015) themselves propose many of the theoretical moves that I argue for here, drawing on pragmatist theories of action (Joas 1996) and relational sociology

³ For example, Morrow (2014) explores the origins of restraint in war as reciprocal, self-interested agreements between parties, acknowledging throughout that these agreements (and responses to violations thereof) are backed by strong moral sentiment, but does not need or want to account for it in his theory.

(Emirbayer 1997; Jackson and Nexon 1999) to try to access the dynamic processes of innovation and social interaction that constitute norms. However, by still retaining the concept of ‘norm’ as an entity in their theory, leave opaque the complex social relations establishing normativity as a causal force, and focus on interpretations of the norm in question, rather than on the practices out of which the appearance of stable and singular norms *emerge*. Building theories around concept of the normative configuration goes beyond purely interpretive methods by locating the *causal potential* of normativity and of the forces that drive normative change.

The normativity of action

I propose that normativity exists *within* action. For constructivists, acts carry an implication of propriety—of their own goodness or rightfulness. In other words, almost nobody consciously does something without also thinking that there is a compelling or justifying reason for it, and those habits and practices that we perform without conscious thought are conditioned by learned standards of propriety. When an action is to any degree self-aware, it is joined with normative judgement and claim. Conversely, action, when aggregated and arranged in certain ways, provides the generative and disciplinary force for normativity in social orders in general. In this sense, so-called ‘norms’ are not substantive objects in the world but momentary snapshots or settings of the ‘rules of the game’, anchoring social understandings and values for both scholars and their subjects alike, but open to transformation as ‘players’ continually renegotiate and reinvent them. Beneath seemingly settled regimes of human rights, sovereignty, and cooperation are a fractal of nested deliberate and accidental revision of practices and institutions, for status, for efficiency, or principle. Normativity is established, enforced, and interpreted by ongoing processes of social interaction.⁴

This view grants normativity a pervasive and persistent role in the ongoing creation of society and subjects alike, as that aspect of action that goes beyond the purposes of the individual actor, and establishes seemingly independent or

⁴ For a range of helpful relational perspectives on processes of institutional transformation and normative contention, see Depélteau 2013, Fligstein and McAdam (2012), McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), and Emirbayer (1997).

impersonal sources of meaning, value, and justification. If this is the case, normativity can only be understood alongside and through a more general theory of action, in which the normative and non-normative aspects of action are clearly defined and related to one-another. Normativity is a dimension of action, but so too is instrumentality, and moreover, normativity is both an ‘objective’ and forceful feature of the social world actors must account for in their strategies and habits, and a ‘subjective’ orientation towards particular values and ends. This yields a puzzle: how do we describe potential for self-reformation and world-transformation definitive of agency, without neglecting the dispositional role that values and meanings play, both by orienting action around particular ends and by supplying a repertoire of known means? Or, put most simply, how are creativity, as the capacity to invent new worlds, and sociality, as the orientation towards meaningful collective life, knit together in practice?

Ultimately, this question can be answered only with a general theory of action. Yet this is a fractured and long-standing project,⁵ and all positions lead to difficulties in accounting for all dimensions of normativity. Most theories of action—from Weber and Parsons to Goffman and Bourdieu—offer either an undersocialised (overly voluntaristic) or an oversocialised (overly deterministic) account of normativity. First and obviously, instrumental theories of action, such as those underpinning rationalist approaches (for example, Olson 1965; Elster 1989) explicitly sanitise action of normativity, and are thus inadequate for studying normativity as a causal force. This is why, for example, Morrow (2014) may explain the instrumental dynamic of reciprocity in military adherence to the laws of war, but lacks any account of why actors may feel it is right, proper, or humane to do so. Second, action theorists may taxonomise action into analytically distinct categories that provide traction on some cases but abstract increasingly far from human experience, or grant a normative dimension to only some acts.⁶ This is precisely what

⁵ For a full review of the range and history of action-theorising in social theory. See Joas and Beckert (2001). Here I only touch upon a few significant aspects of that project.

⁶ Weber does this with his famous typology of action. While ‘value-rational’ action, oriented around some principle of right conduct irrespective of the actor’s ends, attends to normativity, ‘purposive-rational’ action does not, because it is wholly instrumental pursuit of ends, free of any consideration as to the boundaries of propriety (Habermas 1984). Weber’s third type, ‘practical action’, features only a pseudo-normative dimension, as it refers to habits that actors initiate and

occurs when, in IR, a ‘norms-based’ or ‘ideational’ explanation is seen as competing with a rationalist or ‘material’ one, as if actions could be exclusively one or the other. Together, these two problems obtain in the bulk of action theory,⁷ and they make it hard to give an action-centric account of normativity.

The way around these problems lies in pragmatic or practice-focused strands of theorising on action—in particular the approaches taken by Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Goffman’s studies of communication focus on its role in ‘strategic interaction’: game-like engagements between two or more parties in a ‘well-structured situation of mutual impingement where each party must make a move and where every possible move carries fateful implications for all parties (1969, 100–101). While this view may at first sound overly instrumental, a careful examination of Goffman’s central concept of the ‘interaction order’ shows that it pays considerable attention to normativity (Goffman 1983). Normative commitments enable the strategic element of communication, as an essential component of the social terrain and a source of leverage upon all actors (Goffman 1959, 1969). This approach explains a great deal about how even subordinate participation interactions entails recognition and agency—such as through managing their stigma (Adler-Nissen 2014) or in diplomatic ‘pecking orders’ (Pouliot 2016). However, while it does weave together normative and instrumental dimensions to action, it cannot account for the genesis and transformation of values. This is partly due to a steadfastly micro-sociological focus, but also because Goffman’s interest is in theorising communicative exchanges rather than institutions, sparing him the need to navigate the problems of action theory more generally. In other words, Goffman shows the value of situated, performative views of action, but his approach is too ‘presentist’ to explain processes of change over time.

Bourdieu, who does theorise institutions, provides another promising angle on normativity in action: socially conditioned actors reproducing culture through

perform without deliberation or calculated forethought (Kalberg 1980).⁶ Parsons’ appropriation of Weber rendered all action normative, but only by subordinating it to the functions of the holistic social system, dissolving agency entirely (Giddens 1979; 1984). Habermas’s theory of ‘communicative action’ (1984)⁶ is (explicitly) a more pragmatic synthesis, but it still retains the Kantian bifurcation of the normative and the instrumental found in Weber, making it impossible to analyse the mutual implication of moral and strategic factors.

⁷ On this, see Joas (1996).

habituated practices, situated in and oriented by a field of power relations between subjects (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). This explains how actors develop values but may also change them, through manoeuvres that alter the contexts cultural production and economic competition (1993)—for example, by exploiting diplomatic alliance structures to build support for controversial interventions (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). The critical disadvantage of Bourdieu is the strictly constrained self-awareness he assigns his actors, which does not allow for deliberate and self-conscious action; actors engage only tactically, and never consider or seek to change the broader social conditions generative of subjects in the first place (Bohman 1999; Margolis 1999; Depelteau 2013). In other words, Bourdieu knits together normativity and instrumentality, accounts for order and history,⁸ but does so by curtailing the liveliness and potential for self-awareness in action. In a sense, then, both Bourdieu and Goffman capture normativity in action, but from two opposing and incomplete perspectives; the former presents an over-socialised view of actors and the latter neglects socialisation processes altogether. The result in both cases is a view of action inadequate for the task at hand, but which is nevertheless instructive.

The strengths and limitations of Goffman and Bourdieu suggest how best to theorist normativity in action. Both theorists ‘externalise’ normativity, treating it as a feature of the environment in which action takes place. In other words, Bourdieu’s *field* and Goffman’s *interaction order* describe the institutionalisation of normativity without reifying it into discrete and autonomous social entities. At the same time, both miss the bidirectional constitution between ends and means, meaning that actors, in their theories, lack the deliberative capacity to act upon themselves as well as simply on one-another. Yet this sort of self-reformation is an evident feature of a number of historical cases,⁹ and by treating it as a potential outcome of all action, both determinism and voluntarism can be avoided. Moreover,

⁸ For a sustained examination of Bourdieu as an historical sociologist, see Gorski 2013.

⁹ One notable example would be the emergence of a Jewish national identity, and, eventually, of a Jewish national state. Another would be the rapid emergence of a Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian ethno-nationalisms during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Beyond nationalism, theological reformations leading to holistic reorganisations of the polity and the political subject, such as the Protestant Reformation, might also qualify.

that possibility is also essential to most normative theorising, as a society incapable of reflection upon the good has limited horizons of transformation.

A pragmatist view of action

Pragmatism offers a way to theorise normativity in action that does not suffer from the problems of those other approaches surveyed. A pragmatist theory of action begins not with wilful actors, nor with the dispositional properties of social structures, but with a certain kind of relation: the transaction. Acts are transactions between the body, or organism, and its physical environment, stimulated by impulses shaped by evolution but underdetermined in their expression (Dewey 1983, 117–118). The term ‘transaction’ here refers to arrangements of unfolding processes which cannot be specified apart from one-another, extending in time as well as space, and which, in the case of the organism and its environment, deny the independent pre-existence of either one (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 137). Acts ground human behaviour and perception, and establish human experience as an ‘organized context of meanings and activities’ (Alexander 1987, 133). In other words, acts are what knit things together, and they create the conditions for the emergence of mind and for the definition of world.

Acts are often routinised. Dewey uses the term ‘habit’ for acts that take place with little conscious reflection, as ‘an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response’ (Dewey 1983, 32), which (contingently) manifests in similar though not identical acts across social time and space. But habits are more than simply expressions of acquired dispositions. They are part of the environment in which the organism lives and acts: they are ‘situational structures rather than individual reflexes, psychic associations, or repeated actions’ (Alexander 1987, 142). As a form of action, habits possess ‘causal efficacy’ as both a medium and an outcome of ongoing organism-environment transactions. They are part of a relational process of adjustment to the contingencies of experience, and generate both self and world.

Habits, however, are not always sub-intentional or unconscious, and can be subject to modification. When habit is interrupted or inhibited, the organism must select from a wide range of mutually exclusive responses. The way by which it does so is through reflective self-awareness, from the consideration and selection of

alternatives (Hildebrand 2008, 28–30). Thus, unlike in theories of practice or habit where action lacks conscious intentionality, in pragmatism action moves in and out of self-awareness, and cognition occurs at both levels.

This approach rests on a peculiar theory of mind: that it exists *in the doing* rather than as a distinct faculty applied *to* action and decision as needed. In Dewey's own words:

[Mind] never denotes anything self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but is always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and groups...*Mind is primarily a verb.* (my emphasis; Dewey 1987, 268)

Put more simply, action is what produces minds because minds *are* actions: they are ongoing processes of reflection and habit-modification, directed at coping with the inhibitive or indeterminate features of the world. For humans, mind is therefore social, because we live in a world of other people.

This philosophical foundation makes possible a *pragmatic* view of agency—not as something made specifically possible by structured relations of enablement and constraint but arising from an inherent human capacity for continual innovation. Agency does not refer to a capacity of individual persons to act with freedom or flexibility, but of action itself to change the world. In other words, agency is the power of action, rather than the power *for* action. That capacity receives its expression in the relationship between action and its ends:

[New] goals will arise on the basis of newly available means....This reciprocal process between means and ends structures action. It anchors the notion of goals firmly in the action process itself and argues against the external setting of goals as advocated in teleological theories of action. This allows one to perceive perception and cognition not as acts preceding action but as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context. (Joas and Beckert 2001: 273)

Thus a pragmatist view of agency refers to the ongoing adaptive process, where organisms become agents by acting within an environmental context that both

circumscribes and constitutes them, establishing creative possibilities for dynamic subjects constituted by action and changing along with it.

A pragmatist focus on evolving transactions covers both the creativity of action and the way it is shaped, oriented, and directed by historically determined, institutionalised social settings, imposing pressures and offering opportunities. The process of inhibition and reorientation of habit explains both how normativity persists in familiar forms and also how it may change rapidly in form or content. It grants actors the possibility of significantly reinterpreting their goals and obligations without denying the value-laden nature of both. Yet it lacks a well-specified theory of the social environment; the pragmatist view of action focuses on the capacities of the organism to adapt, but does not offer any clear way of describing the institutional settings in relation to which adaption occurs, nor of grasping political struggle between persons and groups. In the next sub-section, I suggest a way of doing so.

From action to the normative configuration

By analysing social arrangements through the lens of pragmatist action theory, a certain conception of their normative dimensions emerges: the concept of the *normative configuration*. It refers to the same kinds of things that scholars have called ‘norms’ and their effects, but it replaces that vocabulary with an alternative on—for new language often carries with it new sensitivities and opportunities for novel theories. Normative configurations are arrangements of ongoing, interacting practices establishing action-specific regulation, value-orientation, and avenues of contestation. In other words, they are processual, heterogenous, and provide both ends and means to actors, by directing action towards the attainment of particular outcomes and by treating certain kinds of symbols and performances as authoritative. Not every arbitrary assortment of practices constitutes a normative arrangement by this definition, but every practice is necessary part of one, as normative arrangements provide direction and cultural depth to social life. Hence the task for the investigator is to find which practices come together to generate a particular set of regulative outcomes, and to study in particular their normativity-producing dimensions.

This definition rests on four ‘wagers’—propositions about the dimensions of normativity distilled from the foregoing discussion of action and the social world. First, as normativity inheres in the action process, the mechanisms of normativity are the ways it features in evolving transactions linking actors to one-another and to their worlds. Second, as normativity provides subjects with ends, with means, and with the symbols, performances, and social skills through which to link the latter to the former, it inscribes or institutionalises culture into the action environment. This allows it—an outcome of action—to in turn become a *component* of subsequent action. Third, normativity enables the recursive transformation of ends and means. It orients action around certain ends but also makes possible ethical transformation, as ends are rarely consistent, featuring competing imperatives and values-in-tension which must be resolved through creative problem-solving. Fourth, normativity crystallises into institutional regimes. This is what enables observers to speak of seemingly enduring ‘norms’. Collectively, these wagers provide a meta-theoretical approach the understanding what normativity is and how it works, and provide a basic analytical architecture for examining historically specific processes of social change.

I base these wagers on an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of a number of relational and practice theorists who wed their theory of action with one of social order. Pragmatism implies that social arrangements are not only an outcome of organism-environment transactions, but feed back into the environment itself, and thus are part of a recursive process that generates actors as fully-fledged subjects. Moreover, because action is a process, it has a history and a boundary (Rescher 1996); it has physical, temporal, and conceptual edges that give it presence in space and time. A range of broadly relational social theories already speak to this in various ways, from the capillary operations of *power/knowledge* discussed by Foucault (1980), to the practice-oriented synthetic social theory of Giddens (1979; 1984; in IR, see Steele 2008), to the Marxian-inspired agent-structure co-determinism of critical realism (Bhaskar 1998; Archer 1995; in IR see Wendt 1987; Wight 2006). Yet not all such approaches are equally sympathetic to a pragmatist analyses of normativity. Indeed, all three of those listed examples offer

comparatively limited space for the situated and reflexive creativity key to understanding normative transformation.

However, other views of normativity can extend pragmatist theorising beyond the immediacy of action. They approach the world as neither a cohesive whole nor an epiphenomenon of individual agents, but a structured configuration of transactions, generating both the action environment and the social material constituting actors as subjects imbued with dispositions and capacities. The four wagers draw from the agreements, strengths, and weaknesses of the more prominent of these approaches.

Wittgenstein's notion of the 'language game' envisions a practical, ongoing series of communicative interactions governed by rules but underdetermined by them (Wittgenstein 1958). Language games are bundles of practices and habits, and their form generates both the player and the 'rules of the game' alike. Yet because rules must be interpreted, there is always room for creative revision, and thus language games feature continual, dynamic transformations of the conventions that define them and the actors that play them. This suggests a view of social settings as plastic, horizontally distributed interchanges of rule-following performances, in which action is normatively oriented but retains creative and interpretive features (Winch 1958; see also Schatzki 1996). Goffman's work on communicative interaction, while not based on a reading of Wittgenstein, is nevertheless an excellent example of the sociological implications of thinking in terms of something language games.

Reading Wittgenstein as a theorist of normativity offers a key lesson: action is lively and the rules or institutions that form out of it are never 'out of play'. The more robust they seem to be, the more interaction must be oriented around their maintenance. But while Wittgenstein alludes to a defined and historically embedded normative setting arising out of action, he misses the institutional and causal dimensions of normativity. The fluidity and multiplicity of language games, and the prioritisation of hermeneutic explanations for changes in behaviour, leave little room for theorising politics as genuine struggle in a world of competition and constraint, and thus a Wittgenstein's approach is sociologically limited.

Another helpful view comes from Bourdieu—not just in his capacity as a theorist of action, but as a theorist of social order. Bourdieu has enjoyed a recent renaissance amongst IR scholars, for whom he has offered a potent means of theorising the habitual, embodied, and localised communities of practice that constitute key international institutions (Pouliot 2010; Bigo 2011), the dispositional metaphysics of power (Guzzini 2013), and much of the foundation for the ‘practice-turn’ that has more generally taken shape in the field (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2015). His concept of the ‘field’, by which he means a social space made up of asymmetrical relations of power and exchange, envisions an objective domain in which the artefacts of culture are produced and in which actor-positions of advantage are captured, defended, secured, contended, and expanded (Bourdieu 1984). Since Bourdieu put ‘fields’ to use in a range of now-famous analyses of a wide range of spheres of institutional and cultural life, other sociologists have developed the concept further. In a major recent book, *A Theory of Fields*, Fligstein and McAdam offer the following concise definition of the concept: a ‘mesolevel social order in which actors...interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field’ (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 1).

This definition suggests what ‘fields’ bring to a consideration of normativity, and also what limits their use for analysing normative transformation. Like the concept of the language game, ‘fields’ describe a structured normative context for action: as an ordered terrain of social life comprising opposing institutional and economic positions, it accounts for the constitution of actors and action possibilities. Actors’ manoeuvres and stratagems establish new cultural materials and new pathways for future such actions, enabling the normativity of action to work as a transformational force. However, the concept has two salient limits. First, because ‘fields’ are constitutively arranged around struggles for domination and supremacy, they feature a thin notion of normativity seemingly based on a quasi-instrumental view of action. Actions appear cynical, and lack the aspirational creativity that drives normative transformation on the pragmatist view. Second, transformations in fields are temporally detached from transformations of actors themselves; while a

changing field should feature changing subjects, the two processes do not need to occur with any immediate reciprocity—and indeed, a key argument Bourdieu advances in a number of cases is that actors may possess a form of subjectivity ill-suited to life in their field (Bourdieu 1984; Steinmetz 2013). Hence, while the concept of ‘field’ offers clues as to how to conceive of the cultural and institutional dimensions of normativity in action, it is not adequate for analysing normative transformation—at least not without significant revision.

Norbert Elias offers final insights. He shows how changes in personal psychological make-up; subjectivity recursively supports and is supported by broader institutional arrangements in society (Elias 1994). At the core of this is his concept of a ‘figuration’: an interwoven complex of individuals living within a form of life, ‘characterized by socially and historically specific forms of habitus, or personality-structure’ (van Krieken 1998, 52–53). Stable figurations not only condition actor identities, but also sustain the action environment, making politics possible in the first place: ‘At the core of changing figurations—indeed the very hub of the figuration process—is a fluctuating, tensile equilibrium, a balance of power moving to and fro, inclining first to one side and then to the other’ (Elias 1978, 131). Social arrangements also play a dual ontological role, as both sources of subjectivity, as packages of values and dispositions, and as structured environments of resources and constraints. In IR, Linklater (2011) has made use of Elias’s approach in a major study of the history of the cosmopolitan harm principle, and it is not hard to see how similar studies might be produced of other normative features of international politics that range individual emotions to major institutions—such as national identity and protections for children in cases of trafficking or conflict.

There are two lessons in Elias’s approach that inform the conception of normativity I advance. First, that are both continually transforming and entangled within a similarly transforming array of broader institutional and cultural relations. Second, that both subjects and their words exhibit transactional dynamicity even though they are beholden to without power and domination in history. Its weakness, however, is an under-specified relationship between action and the constitution of these subjects and worlds. In other words, and unlike with Wittgenstein and Bourdieu, it is hard to connect Elias’s approach to the way normativity empowers

practice. Yet by reading Elias in concert with them, the synthetic understanding I propose should appear sound, and it should be apparent how it fits within the broader agenda of both action theorists and those studying the causes and effects of ‘norms’.

Analysing Normative Transformations in Three Stages

In order to identify how a particular normative transformation of interest took place, I propose a three-stage analytical process: *de-reification*, *attribution of agency*, and *tracing transactions*. Many elements of this are already present in the discipline, in mapping out where norms sit within a set of institutions, identifying opportunity structures and agents or ‘entrepreneurs’ of norm change, and tracing how they go about mobilising. Indeed, I retain these elements by design, both because that makes it easier for norm researchers to adopt and also because those researchers have in many ways implicitly grasped the need to de-reify their objects of study, even if their ontological vocabulary does not fully allow for this. The novelty here is a systematic approach for organising analytical procedures around representing heterogeneous, interwoven practices, in arrangements of sympathy and tension, rather than summarising them as singular objects, and showing how these arrangements fluctuate. This distills the insights of relational and pragmatist theory into a better-specified methodological framework for case analysis.

In *de-reification*, the researcher disaggregates the ‘norm-like’, defined by historical place as well as regulatory function, into its components. This stage recognises that what motivates an investigation of normativity is often the apparent presence of what scholars have previously called ‘a norm’: some clear social agreement on a rule, value, principle, or institution, as something stable enough and coherent enough to influence the conduct of actors and be noticed by scholars. Yet instead of identifying this point or process of consensus as a ‘norm’, scholars instead represent it as a normative configuration—as the institutions, actors, means, formal and informal regulations, and practices generating stability in normativity over time. Notably, this should yield more than just an assortment of discourses; it should mean indexing a form of life. This also identifies points of tension, where problems of implementation or disagreement may spark innovation and transformation, along

with the media through which sources influence and interact with the broader relational field in which they are situated.

De-reification shares much in common with the mapping of fields of structural and semiotic relations (Bourdieu 1993; Epstein 2013; Pouliot 2007), along with the identification of actors and specialised structures of institutional governance (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Examples of skilful normative de-reification by IR scholars include enquiries into cosmopolitan views on harm (Linklater 2011), the foundations of human rights in Israel (Krebs and Jackson 2007), and the challenges presented by war crimes allegations to Turkish and Japanese identity (Zarakol 2010)—all marked by an attention to process and to relational analyses. Simply put, this stage means identifying the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* of a given case of normative transformation.

The second stage, *attribution of agency*, draws from the pragmatist and relational view that agency emerges out of transactions between organisms and their environments (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; see also Latour 2005). The premise here differs from the approach taken in most research on norms of treating agency as something *actors have*, and instead looks for agency in *situations with a propensity for change*. This is a necessary move when the objects of investigation comprise a distributed arrangement of actors all capable of revising their actions, but not all afflicted with the will to do so, even if opportunities could be found or made. Moreover, it recognises that agency is not just actors altering situations, but also altering themselves, and thus cannot be assigned to any one kind of thing (like an ‘entrepreneur’ or an organisation).

Attribution of agency involves locating and specifying transactions most likely to drive a normative transformation of interest. The scholar must look at a normative configuration and mark out points of contestation, technological innovation, or organisational openness—the places where processes of normative transformation are most likely to emerge. On a pragmatist and relational view, attribution of agency is also ‘agency detection’—a systematic establishing of who and what was instrumental in driving certain changes. Moreover, it is testable, and if it is incorrect, it will not be possible to complete the third stage of the analysis. This provides methodological room to consider a range of competing explanations,

and to examine whether they specify causal processes that can, plausibly explain the observed normative transformation.

Several traditions of institutional analysis all feature agency attribution, albeit not per the pragmatist approach. Historical institutionalists examine exogenous shocks as destabilising influences, identifying situations of crisis and actors with ambitions for change, the combination of which establishes the conditions for transformation (Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Steinmo 2008). IR scholars studying the rise of new prohibitory regimes in the wake of the Cold War (Nadelmann 1990), for example, relate major upheavals to new space for normative change. Complexity theorists study non-linear forms of interaction and thresholds at which small changes in particular interactions can lead to large changes across an entire system (Mitchell 2009), generating interesting transformations (Byrne 1998; Jervis 1998), such as in warfare (Bousquet 2008) or global climate governance (Hoffman 2011). Finally, practice theorists do not just map fields but also identify kinds of practices or types of practitioners with unusual transformative potential (Schatzki et al 2001; Adler and Pouliot 2011), though indicators of rising pressure, friction, or institutional weakness. Though a pragmatist approach will focus specifically on sources of situated creativity, attributing agency is an established methodological technique, able to fit within a range of analytical frameworks.¹⁰

The third stage, *tracing transactions*, is a form of ‘process tracing’: ‘the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case’ (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 7) What distinguishes it from investigating how specific actors contest, interpret, or propagate ‘norms’ it is the focus on reciprocal re-constitution; that is, searching within strings of transactions for the ways actors transform, with each iteration leaving the situation and everyone involved a little different than before. It emphasises the embeddedness of actors within their own dilemmas, such that both are transformed through situated action. For the study of normative transformation,

¹⁰ Other approaches with an existing presence in IR include network analysis (Hafner-Burton et al 2009) and actor-network theory (Walters 2002, though see also Nexon and Pouliot 2013). Constraints of space limit deeper engagement with them, however.

this offers one important benefit: it reveals how existing prohibitions can be ‘side-stepped’ not by changing what is prohibited but by transitioning out of given institutional category of regulated actor, with the ultimate effect being a new relationship between a rule and the conduct of those supposedly bound by it.

Normative Transformation, Practices, and Relations

The theory of normative transformation I offer here is explicitly built around practice and relationality—both subjects of recent ‘turns’ in the discipline. I argue that it is better suited to practice or relation centric approaches than are mainstream theories of ‘norms’, because it is ontologically consistent with their premises. Yet there already exists research in the practice and relational turns focusing on normative change without making use of the conceptual vocabulary of norms scholarship. Mainly this tackles large-scale historical transformation featuring changes not only in which conventions, rules, principles, and values are extant but also in how they are woven together in practice. In other words, there are periods of meta-normative transformation too lengthy or multidimensional to be easily narrowed down to contestation or entrepreneurship over specific ‘norms’. The gradual emergence and elaboration of a cosmopolitan notion of harm, and of harm-reduction as a moral principle, is one such example (Linklater 2011). Another is the emergence and management of self-other relations between China and the nomadic communities of the Inner Asian steppe, producing normative categories and their maintenance in practice (Mackay 2016). A third is the emergence of a relatively stable set of identities and relations across religious divides (and their associated territories and institutions) in Europe, which occurred through intense social movement contestation (Nexon 2009). All trace the causes and effects of particular constellations of principles, rules, authorities, and values—the stuff of ‘norms’—but avoid foregrounding norms in their analytical apparatuses.

Moreover, practice-turn-associated scholars have also recently set forth configurational approaches able to perform some of the same analytical work as the approach I propose here. Vincent Pouliot recently combined Bourdieu’s field theory and Goffman’s theory of the interaction frame in a study of diplomatic ‘pecking orders’ (2016). Emanuel Adler’s forthcoming book (2019) sets forth a theory of

‘cognitive evolution’ mobilising process ontology to explain transformations in epistemic communities of practice. These two examples suggest that my own proposal is in good company, but also is consistent with a broader trend.

Yet a theory of normative transformation *in particular* adds value to the practice and relational turns in a number of ways, all generally a result of reapproaching the ends and interests of the norms research programme in new ontological terms. First and foremost, it conserves one of the most significant achievements of constructivist IR to date: the reified view of norms itself enabled the *de*-reification of other key institutions and assumptions taken for granted by neorealist and neoliberal IR scholars, as part of the constructivist critique (McCourt 2016). This is not an irony; it is an illustration of the explanatory virtues of gathering together and concretising dispersed processes and relations, in cases where doing so makes tractable clear transformations in the objects of our investigation. While treating norms as real objects with essential features is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, establishing their conceptual relevance, whether through reification or analytical ‘arrestation’, made it possible to explore the mutability of international relations, against the dogmas of anarchy and its implications.

Second, it mobilises one of the best methodological contributions of the practice and relational turns: ethnographically sensitive ‘practice mapping’ (Pouliot 2014) to identify normativity even when there are no easily identifiable ‘norms’. Here the *de-reification* phrase of the proposed analytical process is especially valuable. Investigations into semi-secret institutions, such government security agencies or corporations concerned about proprietary industrial practices, or into culturally alien social spaces (either domestic or foreign) are most likely to present initial difficulties to researchers looking for ‘norms’, but by instead looking for normative configurations, it becomes easier to develop an ontologically coherent picture of regulation and valuation. It allows for the investigation of normativity without needing to know of, or refer to, some correlate ‘norm’, sidestepping data gaps and possible debates on whether a norm exists rather than on whether something *normative* exists. Put differently, the theory of normative transformation I advance here is ontologically consistent with the practice turn but offers a set of concepts and commitments more sensitive to making sense of normativity than those

currently available in practice theories of international relations. It maintains normativity as something specific, with its own language of ethics, imperatives, and value, even if studying normativity may involve the tracing of changes in practices and communities thereof.¹¹

Finally, it expands the vocabulary available to scholars in these to turns for studying more delimited episodes of institutional or practice transformation where there is clearly some significant regulatory or evaluative change, occurring rapidly yet not oriented around something they want to call a ‘norm’, both for ontological reasons and perhaps because actors themselves do not seem to conceive of it in that way. There are cases where part of the normative transformation taking place is not in what standards, values, or principles should apply to a situation, but in what counts as conforming to them. The cases of targeted killing, torture, and armed contractors, already discussed in the introduction, are examples of these. Contestation over definitions were part of what happened, but processes of practitioner-driven problem-solving, organisational change, and technical innovation feature in them as well, in ways that extend beyond discourse. They show changed understandings of what counts as a competent performance, as interests practice theorists (Adler and Pouliot 2011), in but in ways that require an analytical language specifically designed to explore the dimensions of rightness, propriety, and value in action—in other words, in ways that require us to talk of normativity as such, without reifying it into social objects or dissolving it into a more general theory of practice.

Conclusion

The pragmatist and relational theory of normative transformation I propose here offers both analytical and metatheoretical benefits. It makes it easier to study rapid institutional change, and offers an expanded vocabulary to those in the practice and relational turn for making sense of normativity while remaining loyal to the basic premises of their approaches. This should advance the overall constructivist project

¹¹ By contrast, if norms and normativity are completely redefined as practices or communities of practice, then the distinctive theoretical purpose of talking about norms in the first place, as I discuss earlier, is lost.

in the field, in ways that sustain and continue a long-standing interest in norms and normativity, but speak to emerging disciplinary shifts in social ontology and methodology.

In the discipline of IR, constructivism has largely been a critical response to dereification (McCourt 2016), and the turns towards practices and relations sustain that critique even as older constructivist work itself becomes a critical target. While the bulk of practice/relational turn scholars and norms scholars alike have been focused on issues of diplomacy and security, the approach to theorising normativity I propose here may help broaden the horizons of both research communities. One particular way is by equipping both with new tools for studying climate governance and other initiatives to grapple with the implications of climate change (Hoffmann 2011), which involve the revision of a host of identities, values, and institutions, and knit together a range of interests and actors to confront an unprecedented global threat.

Another way my proposed approach may contribute empirical value, as noted in the introduction, is to help scholars respond to the rapid, multifaceted transformations occurring, or threatening to occur, in previously stable liberal-democratic institutions, ranging from the domestic to the international. Often not expressly oriented around norm entrepreneurship but nevertheless entailing significant normative change, political parties and campaigns across ‘the West’ employ a host of methods and discourses designed to revise dominant practices and interpretations of human rights, sovereignty, national identity, and citizenship. Appreciating how these insurgents act, and responding to the threats they pose (for those who find them threatening), is aided by the intellectual tools supplied by the philosophical and sociological approaches I draw upon here, and the de-reified conception of normativity and change they disclose. In other words, this essay does not merely respond to a disciplinary puzzle, but also a pressing political problem.

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